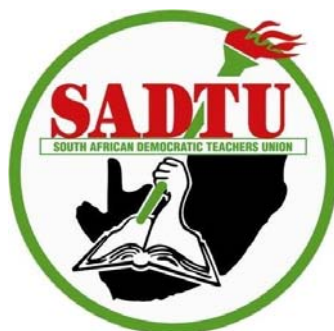


Lesson for

August 9th:

National Women's Day

South African Democratic Teachers' Union



National Women's Day

Commemorating Women's Organisation

For more than a hundred years, South African women have organised themselves for the defence of their best interests. Their most frequent cause was opposition to the Pass Laws that required Black women (and men) to carry a written permission to be in a certain area, which, if they did not have it, might lead to arrest, punishment, or even transportation to another place.

In March 1912 a group of Black and Coloured women from the Orange Free State sent a petition against passes, signed by 5,000 people, to the Prime Minister, Louis Botha. There was no response. By the end of May 1913 they had resolved never to carry Passes again. This passive resistance campaign was met with arrests in Bloemfontein, Jagersfontein and Winburg, in the Orange Free State. In 1914 the government temporarily retreated on the issue.



Women at the Union Buildings, 9 August 1956

Abolition of Pass Laws for women was the issue around which the great march of 20,000 women to the Union Buildings in Pretoria was organised and took place on **9 August 1956**, carrying a petition signed by women from all over the country.

This march of 9 August 1956 was organised by the non-racial Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW, or FSAW). This is the event that is commemorated by our National Women's Day, honoured each year on the 9th of August, and which in 1994 was declared, and has since been celebrated every year, as a public holiday.

The name by which the organised Free State women of 1912-1914 knew each other is not known, but many other, named organisations have been founded since that time in response to the Pass Laws and to other matters of concern to women. They are listed below.

Of these many listed Women's Organisations, three survive today. They are the ANC Women's League, founded in 1948; the Black Sash, founded in 1955; and the Progressive Women's Movement, founded in 2006.



[Charlotte Maxeke, 1874-1939](#)

| <u>Year</u> | <u>Organisation</u> | <u>Leaders</u> |
|-------------|---|--|
| 1918 | Bantu Women's League (BWL) | Founded by Charlotte Maxeke |
| 1933 | National Council of African Women (NCAW) | First President: Charlotte Maxeke |
| 1943 | The ANC officially admits women members | President, A B Xuma |
| 1947 | Transvaal All-Women's Union | Josie Mphama |
| 1948 | ANC Women's League (ANCWL) | Ida Mntwana, President |
| 1954 | Federation of South African Women (FSAW) | Ray Alexander, Dora Tamana, Josie Mphama |
| 1955 | Black Sash (Women's Defence of the Constitution League) | Jean Sinclair, Ruth Foley and others |
| 1975 | Black Women's Federation | Fatima Meer, Winnie Mandela |

| | |
|--|---|
| 1981 The United Women's Organisation (UWO) | Dora Tamana, Mildred Lesia, Amy Thornton |
| 1983 Natal Organisation of Women (NOW) | Phumzile Mlambo, Nozizwe Madlala, Victoria Mxenge |
| 1984 Federation of Transvaal Women (FEDTRAW) | Sister Bernard Ncube, Jessie Duarte |
| 1986 United Women's Congress (UWCO) | From UWO |
| 1987 Federation of South African Women (Fedsaw) re-launch | Cheryl Carolus, Secretary-General |
| 1987 The UDF Women's Congress | Frances Baard |
| 1991 Women's National Coalition (WNCSA) | Frene Ginwala, Anne Letsepe, convenors |
| 2006 Progressive Women's Movement (PWMSA) | Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Mummy Japhta |



Raheema Moosa, Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph and Sophia Williams, Union Buildings, 9 August 1956

National Women's Day is August the Ninth

Part 2

The Founding of the Women's Federation

On 17 April 1954, fourteen months before the Congress of the People, the founding conference of FEDSAW adopted The Women's Charter. Here is the Preamble:

"We, the women of South Africa, wives and mothers, working women and housewives, African, Indians, European and Coloured, hereby declare our aim of striving for the removal of all laws, regulations, conventions and customs that discriminate against us as women, and that deprive us in any way of our inherent right to the advantages, responsibilities and opportunities that society offers to any one section of the population."

Among other things, it says:

"We women do not form a society separate from the men. There is only one society, and it is made up of both women and men. As women we share the problems and anxieties of our men, and join hands with them to remove social evils and obstacles to progress."

The Women's Charter placed the question of women in the mainstream. It went on to say:

"It is our intention to carry out a nation-wide programme of education that will bring home to the men and women of all national groups the realisation that freedom cannot be won for any one section or for the people as a whole as long as we women are kept in bondage."

The **Freedom Charter** was adopted on 26 June 1955. On women, it said:

- *that only a democratic state, based on the will of all the people, can secure to all their birthright without distinction of colour, race, sex or belief;*
- *Every man and woman shall have the right to vote for and to stand as a candidate for all bodies which make laws;*
- *The rights of the people shall be the same, regardless of race, colour or sex;*
- *Men and women of all races shall receive equal pay for equal work;*

Admission of women into the ranks of the ANC happened only 12 years prior to the adoption of the Freedom Charter. If that had not happened, and if the Women's Charter had not preceded the Freedom Charter, then the Freedom Charter would not have achieved the status that it did achieve.

The Aims of the Women's Federation:

In 1954, FEDSAW declared:

This organisation is formed for the purpose of uniting women in common action for the removal of all political, legal, economic and social disabilities. We shall strive for women to obtain:

1. The right to vote and to be elected to all State bodies, without restriction or discrimination.
2. The right to full opportunities for employment with equal pay and possibilities of promotion in all spheres of work.
3. Equal rights with men in relation to property, marriage and children, and for the removal of all laws and customs that deny women such equal rights.
4. For the development of every child through free compulsory education for all; for the protection of mother and child through maternity homes, welfare clinics, crèches and nursery schools, in countryside and towns; through proper homes for all, and through the provision of water, light, transport, sanitation, and other amenities of modern civilisation.
5. For the removal of all laws that restrict free movement, that prevent or hinder the right of free association and activity in democratic organisations, and the right to participate in the work of these organisations.
6. To build and strengthen women's sections in the National Liberatory movements, the organisation of women in trade unions, and through the peoples' varied organisation.
7. To cooperate with all other organisations that have similar aims in South Africa as well as throughout the world.
8. To strive for permanent peace throughout the world.



Florence Matomela addresses the FEDSAW Conference, 1954

The other women on the platform are Hettie September, Ray Alexander, and Dora Tamana

Women Making History

The 9 August 1956 Women's March to the Union Buildings in Pretoria was a demonstration.

The petition, or demand, to the Prime Minister, Strijdom, was headed:

"The Demand of the Women of South Africa for the Withdrawal of Passes for Women and the Repeal of the Pass Laws"

It concludes with these declaratory words:

We shall not rest until ALL pass laws and all forms of permits restricting our freedom have been abolished.

We shall not rest until we have won for our children their fundamental rights of freedom, justice, and security.

The women could not force the Prime Minister, who was one of the most intransigent of the National Party politicians, and he was not forced. Very little changed in terms of what the government was doing then, or later.

But the women made history.



Carrying the petitions to Strijdom's office

We will in due course examine further what the women of South Africa have gained, and what they have not yet gained.

Before that, since this is about history, we can look at what it is and what it means to create a historical mark, deliberately.

The record is not easy to find, and the photographs that are publicly available are mostly small, low-resolution ones.

But these women made a mark that was never rubbed out.



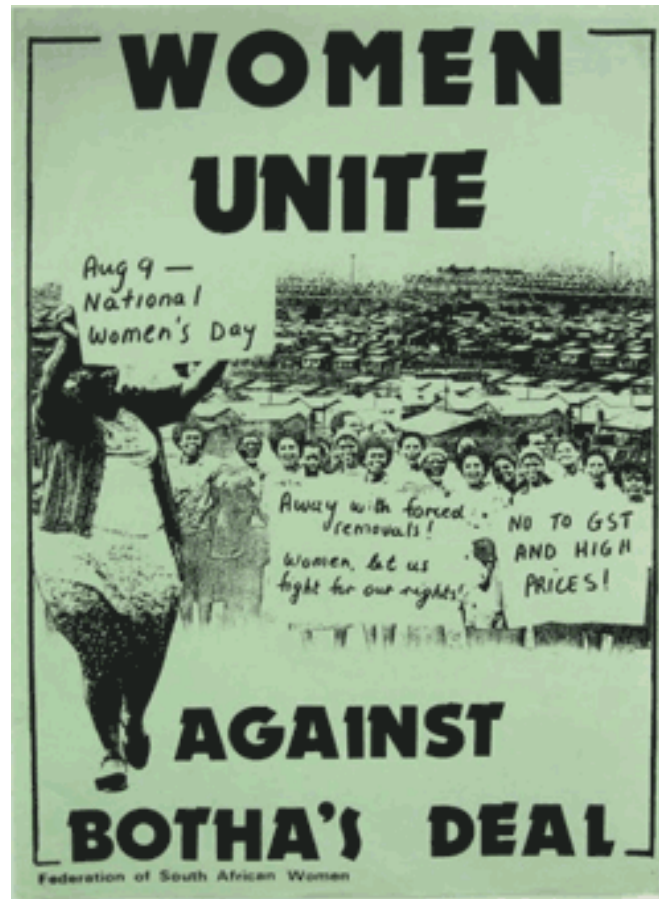
As the Federation of South African Women, they organised for their petition to be signed all over the country. They brought the petitions together and with a large crowd, took them to Pretoria. Did they use buses, or trains? We can assume that very few of these 20,000 women had their own private cars.

This was undoubtedly a “stage-managed”, or “orchestrated” event. It was propaganda, and it was good propaganda, that continues to work well, up to this day.



The Day and The Inscription

In the time of the UDF (1983-92) National Women's Day was not recognised, but it was demanded:



1984 poster for "National Women's Day"

After the democratic breakthrough of 1994, and the ANC's 62 % victory in the April 27 election, August 9th was made by the new, fully democratic Parliament into one of a very few new annual national holidays, of which, together with May Day (Workers' Day), it is one of only two that celebrate something originated by the liberation alliance, prior to 1994.

Freedom Day (April 27th) is the anniversary of the first universal-franchise election itself; March 21st is the anniversary of the Sharpeville massacre of a demonstration organised by the PAC, which was used as a pretext to ban the ANC; June 16th commemorates the youth uprising that was also not directly organised by the ANC; and Heritage Day in September was made a holiday at the request of the IFP. The remainder of our public holidays were already holidays under the old regime.

How has Women's Day been kept since 1994? Here is one example.

At the Union Buildings, an installation was put in place, in the year 2000, that included sound and light features that have since been switched off, and a grinding stone that

is out of sight, but most prominently, on the stairs at the centre and apex of the approach to the union buildings, brass letters have been placed on the upright parts, forming an inscription.

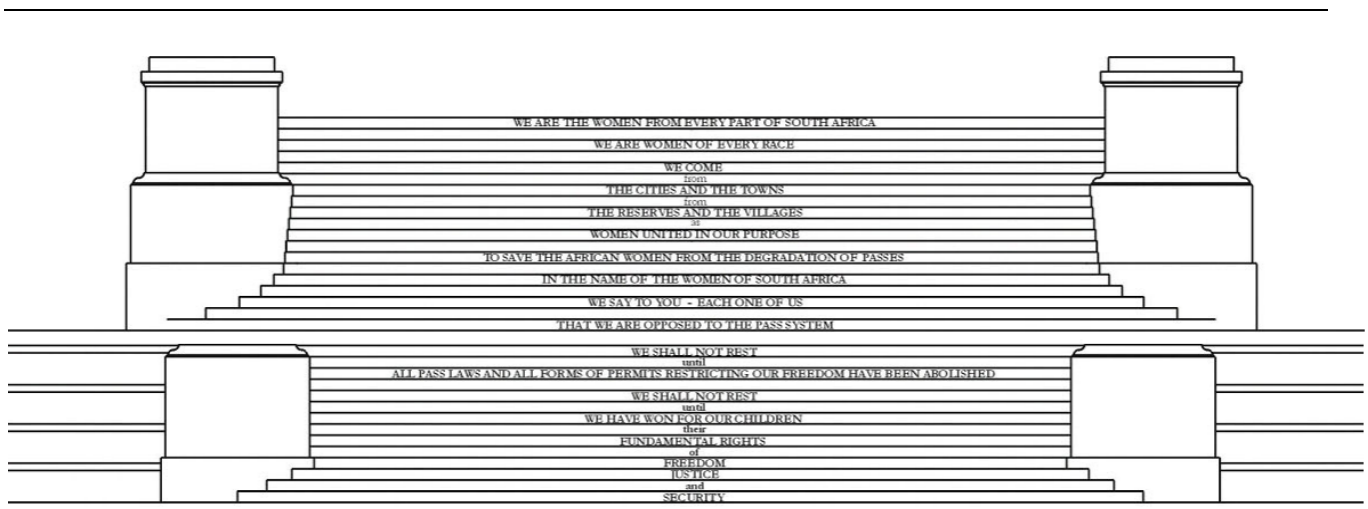
The wording of the inscription is taken from the Demand that the women took to J G Strijdom.

The lettering is in the 2000-year-old Roman “Capitalis Monumentalis” style. It has endured more than the special effects that were installed at the same time.

The architect of the Union Buildings (Herbert Baker, a protégé of Cecil Rhodes) appropriated Roman classical design for the projects of the old Empire. The women have now effectively re-appropriated the same Roman classical style, and successfully used it to overlay their claim on the face of the monumental structure, in a way that is elegant, but can’t be missed.



Photograph of the inscription on the stairs



Drawing for Women’s March inscription at Union Buildings.

Artist Wilma Cruise, architect Marcus Holmes

WE ARE THE WOMEN FROM EVERY PART OF SOUTH AFRICA

WE ARE WOMEN OF EVERY RACE

**WE COME
from
THE CITIES AND THE TOWNS
from
THE RESERVES AND THE VILLAGES
as
WOMEN UNITED IN OUR PURPOSE**

**TO SAVE THE AFRICAN WOMEN FROM THE DEGRADATION
OF PASSES**

IN THE NAME OF THE WOMEN OF SOUTH AFRICA

WE SAY TO YOU – EACH ONE OF US

THAT WE ARE OPPOSED TO THE PASS SYSTEM

**WE SHALL NOT REST
until
ALL PASS LAWS AND ALL FORMS OF PERMITS RESTRICTING
OUR FREEDOM HAVE BEEN ABOLISHED**

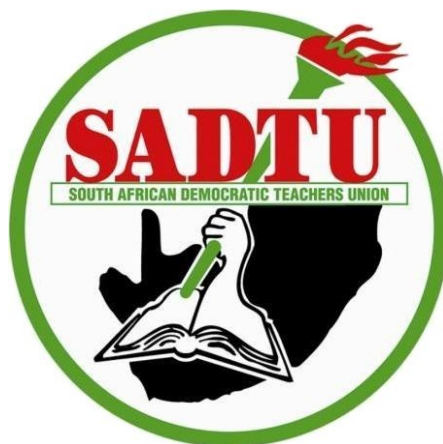
**WE SHALL NOT REST
until
WE HAVE WON FOR OUR CHILDREN
their
FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS
of
FREEDOM
JUSTICE
and
SECURITY**

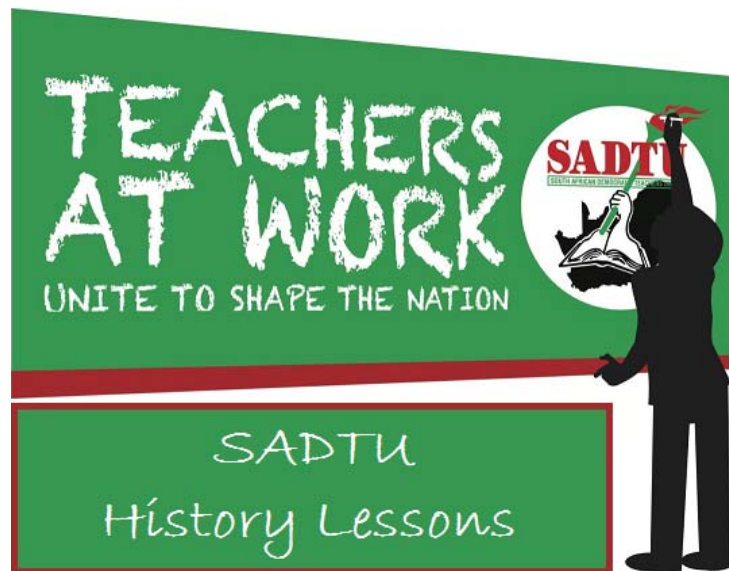
[The inscription, transcribed here in "Times New Roman"]



Presidents Khama of Botswana and Zuma of South Africa walk down the stairs (2010).

Parts of the Women's March inscription can be clearly seen.





Women Were Part of the Liberation Movement

Because of their campaigns as organised women, and because of their direct participation in other formations of the liberation movement, women were full participants in the liberation movement of South Africa that achieved the breakthroughs of 1990 and 1994.

For the same reasons, the gains that the women of South Africa have made in the same period are not always distinguishable from the gains of the liberation movement as a whole.



Nelson and Winnie Mandela leaving prison on 11 February 1990

The first among these gains is the vote. Women in general gained the vote when the first universal-franchise general election took place on 27 April 1994. Many women were elected to parliament and later, to be councillors in their localities.

The full citizenship of women that comes with the vote also means the final end of the apartheid pass laws, for women as well as for men.

The demand that South Africa should be “non-sexist” as well as “non-racist”, free, democratic, prosperous and a “unitary state”, was added in the 1980s and the early 1990s. Exactly when “non-sexism” became a fixed part of the ANC’s demands is hard to discover, but by now it is a permanent part of the ANC’s constitution, and of the constitution of the country.



Election Queue, Katlehong, 22 April 2009. The majority of South African voters are women.

The material demands of the women that had formed the substance of their earlier campaigns became normal to the general demands for the welfare of the people.

Where to now?

What are the women’s demands of today and of the future?

Women still have to define the place of women within society. One way to do so, as with the liberation movement, is to become part of the general struggles of the people, which are struggles for the birth of the fully-developed, democratic South African nation, culturally as well as politically.

The general struggles of the people are also class struggles, from which women are not exempt.

As women, there are struggles having to do with their understanding of themselves, and the assertion of their particular role in society. These are the struggles against patriarchy and against socially-imposed gender prejudice.

Gains and new expectations

When you put a demand, and you get what you demanded, it is a victory. You may never know if the demand was the cause of the effect, but you celebrate a victory, and you rightly so.

The main demand of 1956 – no pass laws – is won.

Of the other demands of 1954, we can say that, as rights, if not always in practice:

- The right to vote and to be elected, **is won**.
- Equal rights with men in relation to property, marriage and children, and the removal of laws and customs that deny women such equal rights, **are won**.
- The development of every child through free compulsory education for all, **is won**.
- The protection of mother and child through maternity homes, welfare clinics, crèches and nursery schools, in countryside and towns, **is won**.
- Equal opportunities for employment with equal pay and possibilities of promotion in all spheres of work, **is won** as a right.

In practice,

- Proper homes for all, and through the provision of water, light, transport, sanitation, and other amenities of modern civilisation, **are being won**.
- Building and strengthening women's sections in the National Liberatory movements, the organisation of women in trade unions, and through the peoples' varied organisation, **is work in progress**.
- Cooperation with all other organisations that have similar aims in South Africa as well as throughout the world **is happening**.

Permanent peace throughout the world is far from being achieved.

Now we have demands that were never voiced in the 1950s: For the end of patriarchy, and for the beginning of gender balance.

National Women's Day Links:

Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Women's_Day

SAHO: <http://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/20-000-women-march-union-buildings-protest-pass-laws>

Demand of the women: <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=2583&t=ES>

Report of opening of monument, 9 August 2000:
<http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/Mbeki-unveils-womens-monument-20000809>

Artist's page: <http://www.art.co.za/wilmacruise/groupG.htm>

Presidents Zuma and Khama walking down the steps, and article,
<http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/Politics/Zuma-not-disappointed-at-Botswana-20101005>

In 1956, a group of women 20,000 strong, marched to the doors of the Union Building, chanting "Wathint' Abafazi, wathint' imbokodo!" which means "strike the women, strike the rock". When **Wilma Cruise** and **Marcus Holmes** were approached to design a memorial to commemorate the Women's March, they made use of the "imbokodo". The imbokodo is a grinding stone used by the women to grind maize. Cruise and Holmes, rested the imbokodo, representing nurturing and sustenance, on bronze plates, representing the earth and fire. There are two sets of stairs leading to the memorial, and on each step, raised in bronzed letters are the words from 'The Demand of the Women of South Africa for the Withdrawal of Passes for Women and Repeal of the Pass Laws.' On approaching the imbokodo, you will trigger infrared beams, which activates history's "whispered voices", echoed in all eleven official languages, the rally cry, repeated softly. <http://www.southafrica.com/gauteng/pretoria/union-building/>

Union Buildings:

http://www.ibiblio.org/istudio/03pretoria/research/UNION_BUILDING.htm

